



THE PAINTING OF NUDES AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY:
PARLEYINGS ON VICTORIAN CONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMAN

Patricia O'Neill

TWO CULTURES: ONE IDEOLOGY

The nude is not the naked. It is a conventional product, the result of thousands of years of conscious and unconscious effort and much hard thinking.

-Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History* (1950)

Teaching large classes of women, as well as of men, he holds that, both as to the living model in the drawing room and the dead subject in the anatomical lecture and dissecting room, Art knows no sex.

-Interview with Thomas Eakins¹

In his *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1887), Robert Browning uses the biography of Francis Furini, a seventeenth-century painter-turned-priest, to defend the morality of the painting of the nude to his prudish nineteenth-century audience. In the second half of the poem, Browning's Furini speaks directly to the poet's own contemporaries about the ethical value of the human figure in painting. He begins by saluting his audience, "Evolutionists! / At truth I glimpse from depths, you glance from heights" (265-66).² Although Browning's earlier speaker on evolution, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, had quoted

"modern Science," explaining "That mass man sprung from a jelly-lump / Once on a time... Till he attained to be an ape at last / Or last but one" (lines 986-91), Browning's own outspoken faith in God as the *vera causa* was at odds with the scientific account of human evolution posed most authoritatively in Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871). In his parleyings "With Francis Furini," the human figure mediates Browning's defense of the nude in art and his attack on evolutionary science. The significance of the body in art transcends for Browning its representation by science or its utilitarian purposes in ordinary social life.

On the surface, then, “With Francis Furini” presents a territorial dispute among moralists, scientists, and artists for knowledge and power over the human figure. By juxtaposing moral conventions with artistic practice, and then scientific knowledge to artistic effect, Browning calls attention to the intellectual and social pressures that underlie a narrow-minded or materialist view of the body. Against such reductionism, the poet defends an ethical and aesthetic view. Furini’s art, which combines flesh and feeling, teaches the viewer to see between the false opposition of fact and fiction evidence of a greater truth—the “qualifying faculty” in humankind—their mental and moral capacities as “choosers of evil or good” (507). Sympathy for the human figure represented by art thus elevates “man” from the rest of nature, convinces Browning of the existence of soul, and creates social authority for his moral aesthetic.

But the “humanist” argument that Browning makes in this poem relies on paintings of the female nude: Furini’s “Andromeda,” Michelangelo’s “Eve,” and his son Pen Browning’s “Joan of Arc.” It thus exemplifies the Victorian ideological construction of the “human” through its appropriation of the female. In subordinating the value of scientific knowledge and conventional moral wisdom to that of art, Browning’s poem invests the female body with symbolic power to bolster “man’s” otherwise intolerable place in nature. What Browning’s celebration of the female body does not overtly address (but certainly raises for us) are questions about the role of women in the production and reception of art and science in the late nineteenth century.

As an argument for the autonomy of art, Browning’s defense of nude studies is a conventional one: the nude is not the naked. But his poem and the historical circumstances that prompt it point out tensions between the aesthetic representation of “woman” and the social context of Victorian women. A protest by a “British Matron” against the numerous paintings of nudes in the 1885 exhibition at the Royal Academy coincided with the rejection of Browning’s son’s painting of a bathing Joan of Arc. Browning’s poem responds to the controversy over nude studies by reproducing through its own structure and argument the web of assumptions that implicate art in the social conventions it is supposed to go beyond. The transcendent or universal

beauty of the female body that Browning’s theory of art ostensibly promotes inevitably casts shadow images of the actual conditions in which women lived.

As an argument for art’s special knowledge of human passions and sympathies, Browning’s poem flounders on its contradictory uses of the female body. On the one hand, the supranatural beauty of the female figure defies the reductive materialism of scientific representations of the body. But Browning’s argument for the moral effects of feminine beauty on the social instincts of men reinforces the rationale in Darwin’s evolutionary perspective for Victorian women’s inferior physical and mental capacities. By exempting or excluding women from the struggle for survival in nature and for dominance in society, Browning’s aesthetic and Darwin’s science dovetail in support of a patriarchal view of “human” nature. This is the perhaps unintended meaning of Eakins’s morbid juxtaposition of “the living model in the drawing room” and the “dead subject in the anatomical lecture and dissecting room”: they become equally significant “Others” for men’s self-knowledge.

While unacknowledged assumptions about gender threaten to undermine his use of the nude to defend the authority of art, Browning’s own poetic practice, which embraces the temporal and the historically specific, does provide ironic commentary on the Victorian’s search for laws (whether moral, scientific, or aesthetic) and thus provides “subverted support” for feminist interventions in literary and social history.³ It is no surprise that Victorian society was oppressive to women. Yet Victorian art and science historically constructed a role for woman at the center of each of their disciplines that produced a surprisingly uniform culture of sexual difference. By historicizing this female subject (as well as her male inventors) and taking a more complicated approach to the opposition between nature and culture, we may expose what the dominant discourse of Victorian culture conceals: the activity of historical women and the contradictions within various strategies for representing the human. Most important, by examining what Teresa de Lauretis has called “technologies of gender” as they develop in Victorian art and science, we may loosen further the teleological straitjacket of some inherited master narratives of Western culture and civilization.

ARCHETYPES AND STEREOTYPES: A BRITISH MATRON CHALLENGES THE MORALITY OF PAINTING THE NUDE

To Realist writers and artists, the natural sciences seemed to offer a precedent for that stripping away of the clothing of illusion from the base flesh of reality, that divesting of experience of the falsehood of spiritual or metaphysical accretions, which was their goal.

-Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (1971, 1987)

Such simple representations [i.e., nude studies] as the “British Matron” protests against are mute yet speaking evidences of the sad fate of other English girls—once as innocent and modest as they are—whom hunger and want have driven to one of two courses, each equally humiliating if not quite equally deplorable.

-Letter to *The Times*, 22 May 1885

“With Francis Furini” constitutes Browning’s response to a week-long controversy over public exhibitions of nude studies that appeared in letters to *The Times* on 20-25 May 1885. Initiated by a “British Matron,” the debate centered on the question of decency in art. According to the *British Matron*, “To show an utter want of delicacy when selecting a subject painted for no purpose but to testify to the painter’s skill is an insult to that modesty which we should desire to foster in both sexes—”The controversy was well timed. Jeffrey Weeks has called 1885 “an annus mirabilis of sexual politics.”⁴ The objections of the *British Matron* to nude studies coincided with the various efforts of social reform movements to eradicate public vice and to end the double standard of morality between men and women. Social purity movements in the late nineteenth century provide an essential context for understanding the reception of art and the role of women in artistic representation.

In the 1870s the Ladies National Association (LNA), led by Josephine Butler, had organized powerful opposition to the Contagious Disease Acts (Walkowitz, 93-147). These laws, which forced single women living near military encampments to submit to regular medical examinations, were intended to reduce the spread of syphilis among the soldiers. Instead, they discriminated against women (the soldiers refused any monitoring of their activities), and because their en-

forcement required the cooperation of the local community, they initiated divisive acts of vigilantism and social ostracism. Women suspected of sexual activity were harassed and eventually isolated from the rest of their community, promoting professionalization of so-called fallen women and creating new troubles for law enforcement. Of course, working and poor women suffered the most. Butler and her colleagues were interested in protecting the individual rights of all women, including prostitutes. However, the campaigns against the Contagious Disease Acts drew wide support from men and women whose humanitarian impulses were often limited by their middle-class ideas of respectability.

The movement to repeal the Acts was superseded by organizations seeking to legislate morality through, for example, enacting age-of-consent laws. According to Judith Walkowitz, the failure on the part of the LNA to define any “positive assertion of female sexuality” left unchanged the underlying assumptions about women as “essentially moral, ‘spiritual’ creatures who needed to be protected from essentially animalistic, ‘carnal’ men” (256). In the 1880s and after, new social purity groups replaced the libertarian and feminist platform of the LNA. The ideological thrust of these groups was to apply the standard of the chaste middle-class woman to society as a whole (Weeks, 81).

Although the state remained a reluctant regulator

of private morality, it responded to public pressure. Prosecution against famous writers and artists was rare, but Edward Bristow has shown how antice activism prompted self-censorship by publishers and popular entertainers. In response to Ellice Hopkins and others in the National Vigilance Association (not to be confused with the LNA), the Royal Academy excluded “indecent studies” from its students’ annual show of 1885 (Bristow, 206). The successful prosecution in 1895 of Oscar Wilde marks the apex of this period of “moral panic” in which late Victorian fears of social fragmentation and loss of world power fueled the demand for moral regulation (Weeks, 91-92).

In this context, the British Matron was a formidable if problematic spokeswoman against the privileges of an exclusive and patriarchal art establishment. Embedded within the issues of morality in art and double standards for men and women, lay problems of middle-class ideology and censorship. The arguments that appeared in *The Times* both for and against nudity in art reflected this larger context of class and sexual politics in ways that complicate any interpretation of the controversy.

New genres and styles in art and literature in the nineteenth century emerged in relation to the growth and power of the middle classes. According to Walter Kendrick, “aristocratic audiences might be pleased by farfetched allegories embellished with gorgeous turns of phrase, but middle-class readers preferred plainly told stories about people with whom they had something in common.” In painting as well, a new industrial middle class preferred art that represented its own world and values. As Lynda Nead has explained, “modern life painting was perceived as middle class art. It was criticized for being vulgar and indiscriminating and was celebrated for its patriotism and morality.” In both cases, the leading characteristic of middle-class taste was a propensity to blur the critical boundaries between life and art. Not surprisingly, then, what patrons and critics meant by their praise or condemnation of “realistic” representations of modern life and what artists and historians have meant by “Realism” in painting and literature are rarely congruent.

Much of *The Times* correspondence about nude studies demonstrates the contradictory aspects of Victorian middle-class taste. The British Matron argued that since it was unlawful for people to go in public

unclothed, nudity in public art exhibitions was also indecent. Her adversaries answered in equally indiscriminating fashion. At least three writers argued that women’s fashions exposed bare flesh to a comparable degree and yet were not considered indecent. Both sides assumed a correspondence in values between life and its representation in art, but with interestingly different class biases. In the view of her critics, the British Matron lacked the appropriate social background to understand either the role of the nude in high art or the social mores of high fashion wherein women flaunted bare breasts and shoulders with impunity. Thus a nascent middle-class aesthetic, which insisted on “realistic” representation, defined the real by referring to the practices of upperclass society. If art imitates life, the most imitable life, for most middleclass viewers, was that of the aristocracy.

Art enthusiasts were caught in a different but related set of conflicts growing out of the new middle-class patronage of art. According to Nead, critics of genre paintings, a style that used subjects from modern life instead of historical subjects, saw middle-class taste as a “restrictive influence,” but middle-class patrons themselves assumed that their interests would be shared by “all sections of society” (Nead, 167-68). Such class prejudices regarding the appropriate subject matter of modern painting clearly affected the debate about nude studies as when, for defense of the nude depended on whether it should be considered an artistic ideal, sanctified by its long tradition in high culture, or a quintessential object of representation for a modern scientific and democratic community.

The Times correspondent “Common Sense” claimed that “the human form is the most beautiful and perfect shape known, and nude studies are always ideals.” The nude’s traditional significance in its classical form was seen allegorically as a figure of beauty, of art, or in the words of William Etty, England’s most successful painter of nudes, “God’s most glorious work.” By this standard, there could be no confusion in men’s minds between the picture of the nude and the woman portrayed, though certainly painterly ambition and manly desire often mixed in practice. Within the circles of the Royal Academy, and in the work of its president Frederick Leighton, the objections of the British Matron appeared simply as misplaced conventionality. The elite tradition of the nude in art was enough to justify

its place in Victorian practice.

Another correspondent, an artist presumably attuned to changes in pictorial style in nineteenth-century art, called the nude “the most beautiful of natural phenomena.” Defense of the nude’s “natural”—not “God-given”—beauty suggests the new criterion of scientific realism, the informing spirit of much of nineteenth-century painting. Taking the natural sciences as their model, Realist painters offered a new, factual interpretation of the human subject. Unfortunately, attention to the physiological details of a contemporary female body made nude studies extremely problematic.⁷ Properly understood, the nude was not a naked body but the artist’s keenest insight into nature itself, whether nature was conceived as Edenic or mysterious and intangible. But Realist treatments of the nude made it difficult to avoid the potential sexuality of the female body. Even so eminent a painter as John Everett Millais came under attack when in 1870 he presented “The Knight Errant.” Millais’s sole attempt at painting the nude scandalized reviewers who found the fleshy model all too real for artistic sensibilities despite the chaste demeanor of the rescuing knight and the obvious allusions to chivalric codes.⁸

Contemporary interpretations of the human subject thus affronted middle-class morality in the very establishment that was supposed to enhance respectability and good taste. Although artists were expected to challenge the muddled views of philistines by revealing the “truth” of nature, scientific approaches to the nude exposed to literal examination the artist’s traditional claims to ideal or symbolic representation. Ironically, just as scientific explanation had made creationism obsolete, it also stripped Eve’s creators of their own illusionary powers. Realism, which touted the revolutionary character of its representations of modern life when it exploited scenes from the lower or working classes, had a more difficult time convincing middle-class women and reviewers of the progressive ethos of the nude. Representations of the modern nude, like representations of prostitutes, had to mediate the social and aesthetic interests of the new style and the public’s expectation of beauty and morality, as well as the claims of a newly enfranchised middle class in search of its own version of high culture. No wonder, then, that the genre was in crisis. I have tried to indicate the class biases behind the question of decency

in the content of painting. But the fact that one of the correspondents complained of the underrepresentation of the male nude in modern painting suggests the almost automatic way in which the nude was identified generically with the female body. Sexual politics more often informs the controversy over nude studies even when correspondents seem to be arguing over social or aesthetic problems of content or form. The nude’s physiognomy could no longer hide behind classical or biblical allusion in the title, composition, or coloration. Instead the female body appeared as a literal transcription of nature, and her nudity portrayed (at least to some viewers at the Royal Academy) women’s vulnerability to the patriarchy, in this case the institution of male artists, critics, and buyers of art.

The British Matron pinpointed the double standard behind the arguments for nude studies by suggesting an equally cavalier approach to male nudity: “Women artists as yet seem content to shame their sex by representations of female nudity; it needs but pictures of unclothed men, true to life, executed by the same skilled hands, to complete the degradation of our galleries’ walls.” The British Matron’s dismay over the subordination of social/moral conventions to artistic privilege is, as I have suggested, a sign of her middle-class conventionality. But her dire prediction that equality will “complete the degradation” may be read ironically as a crypto-feminist threat: pictures of unclothed men by skilled female artists would reveal the vulnerability of men’s power over women. Given art practices that celebrated verisimilitude without the trappings of religion or metaphysics, nude studies in the late nineteenth century, like the Contagious Disease Acts, discriminated against women, exposing them to social scrutiny and control while men’s profligacy and pleasure remained at liberty in the background.

While defenders of the nude were ready to debate the morality of art in general, none of the correspondents pursued the problem of female or male sexuality, or the double standards for expressing pleasure or desire that underlie the controversy. Instead, another correspondent’s correlation of the fate of the artist’s model with that of the prostitute forcefully posited the unhappy effects of the general breakdown of standards of modesty and bodily integrity that nude studies seemed to endorse. Sexual politics remained in abeyance while the terms of the debate, even in the

rhetoric of the British Matron, bogged down in contention over the appropriate subjects for representing middle-class values. Problems of representation and gender were buried under the need to justify art's social and moral authority in an apparently literal-minded and pragmatic age.

Although the middle classes supported the movement of Realism and its depictions of modern life, nude studies delimited a territory between innovative techniques in art and social conventions of morality. While French writers and artists for the most part embraced science and rejected religion as superstition, their

English counterparts continually strove for compromise and reconciliation. Science offered a new style and new subjects for artistic representation, but art's claim to provide the highest form of culture still depended on its ability to move its audience in ethically, and even spiritually, progressive ways. The controversy over the morality of nude studies focused art's critical position in the 1880s between the opposing values of a still strongly traditional idea of moral order and an emerging scientific and increasingly secular society.

In light of such complexities, we can begin to under-

BROWNING'S DEFENSE OF THE PAINTING OF THE NUDE

I trust
 Rather, Furini, dying breath had vent
 In some fine fervour of thanksgiving just
 For this—that soul and body's power you spent—
 Agonized to adumbrate ...

 God's best of beauteous and magnificent
 Revealed to earth—the naked female form.

—Robert Browning, "With Francis Furini" (lines 134-44)

stand why Browning modified his earlier support for Renaissance painters' naturalistic representations of the human figure. In Browning's dramatic monologue, "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855), which George Eliot preferred to "an essay on Realism," the speaker's religious superior acts the part of the critic and condemns Fra Lippo for painting "Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true" (177). Instead, Fra Lippo is admonished to

paint the souls of men—
 Man's soul, and it's a fire, a smoke ... no, it's not ...
 It's vapour done up like a new-born babe—
 (lines 183-85)

Fra Lippo, dismayed at such demands, contends that he can paint the flesh and soul too. Moreover, even if he captures only beauty, "You get about the best thing

God invents: / That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed, / Within yourself, when you return him thanks" (lines 218-20). Fra Lippo's defense of a naturalistic style in art and a secular style in life is deferential throughout, admitting his own sexual indiscretions as part of his humanity, eschewing the abstractions of monasticism, and thereby gaining the night guard's handshake and the implied reader's blessing. But unlike Renaissance realism, pictorial exactness in the nineteenth century sought "truth to nature" without the Christian or Neoplatonic connotations of Renaissance humanism. In "With Francis Furini" (1887), Browning reacts against the reductive tendencies of modern Realism and its scientific principles. The more metaphysical treatment of the body in this poem marks Browning's new approach to "the value and significance of flesh," ("Fra Lippi," line 268). Here the body's sym-

bolic meaning becomes the necessary condition for art's ethical appeal.

Browning's defense of the nude also required a different poetic strategy from his earlier dramatic incarnations of individual painters. The dramatic monologues in *Men and Women* (1855) concerned the psychological struggles of the artist as a representative type of human subject. In "With Francis Furini," Browning invests minimal interest in the character of Furini (whose work he barely knew) and addresses instead the social conditions that led Furini on his deathbed to request that his paintings be burned.

Furini's biographer, Filippo Baldinucci, claimed that the painter-priest had recognized the immorality of his nude studies, a stance Baldinucci himself promulgated in his capacity as art critic and historian. The parallel between Baldinucci's sanctions against Furini and those launched by John C. Horsley, a critic and painter who had objected to Browning's son's paintings, offered Browning an opportunity to address the misunderstandings of both the critics and the public represented by the *British Matron*.⁹ Instead of exploring the self-consciousness of the artist, Browning disrupts the officious art history of critics like Baldinucci and claims authority for himself and Furini to intervene in the accumulation of facts and opinion. Speaking as specialists in the practice of art, Browning and Browning's Furini redefine the problem of representation in both the past and the present circumstances of cultural confusion.

Browning's main target, "Clothes" Horsley, as he was known by some, had written a long letter to *The Times* concerning the controversy over nude studies. He offered three "canons of purity" by which to judge such works: the "love of beauty," "a generalization in the imagination" rather than "literal transcription of individual fact," and the observation of "certain special artistic conventions as old as Praxiteles." The prescriptive character of this narrow and anachronistic conception of art is bad enough, but Horsley must have hit two nerves when he declared that "a Venus, an Eve, or a bather of life size is like an epic poem—it is either a sublime success, or nothing." Horsley's academic approach to painting and, seemingly, to poetry as well repeats the Prior's opinion in "Fra Lippo Lippi," "It's art's decline, my son! You're not of the true painters, great and old!" (lines 233-34).

In calling Furini a "Good priest, good man, good painter," Browning sets his own judgment against such critics of the past and present. He uses a minor and obscure character to prove what would be obvious in the work of an already recognized genius. For Browning, only the hypocrisy of art critics allows them to dismiss peremptorily the work of a merely "good" or unknown artist. Furini's act "Of gracing walls else blank of this our house / Of life with imagery" (lines 51-52) cannot equal the accomplished works of Michelangelo, but the critic

Who clumsily essays,
By slighting painters's craft, to prove the ape
Of poet's pen-creation, just betrays
Two-fold ineptitude.
(lines 58-61)

Adept in neither brush nor pen, the critic is placed two steps lower in the chain of being and ironically foreshadows the problem Browning sees as well in the methods of the evolutionists: theoretical knowledge reduces through abstraction the practical knowledge that comes from experience. Horsley's appeals to the classical tradition may prove theoretically the modern descent of artistic conventions, but such criteria cannot lead understanding forward. Thus the critic "apes" the artist's more expansive and aspirant mode of expression.

Browning's defense of nude studies makes art the soul of experience. To represent life through art, or to represent a painting in a poem, requires that our understanding become more complex and intangible, but not necessarily more abstract. Indeed, in "With Gerard de Lairese," one senses Browning's delight in replacing a painter's landscape with a poet's verbal description. The greater allusiveness of language offers a wider range of mental and emotional associations. But the critic, especially one like Horsley, narrows the play of experience and representation to rules and opinions, exemplifying a kind of automatism, the knee-jerk reaction of a merely physical being rather than the spirit and will of an artist. Making an ape of the art critic signals more than his "two-fold ineptitude" in the verbal and visual arts; inasmuch as the critic mimics the poet by his use of the pen, Browning suggests that the difference is one of kind rather than of degree. Imita-

tion can never match the creativity of artistic representation. The imaginative power of art becomes important in Browning's poem not only to defend even a minor artist like Furini but to see through art the something different in humanity from an apelike body or activity. As we shall see, this conception of art's "human" character becomes problematic as Browning argues for an archetypal beauty and simplicity inherent in the female form.

For Browning, the other side of the problem of critical standards and appreciation of nude studies was the narrow-mindedness of the Victorian public. Furini's models were real enough, but his ambition was to paint

That marvel! which we dream the firmament
Copies in star-device when fancies stray
Outlining, orb by orb, Andromeda-
God's best of beauteous and magnificent
Revealed to earth—the naked female form.
(lines 139-43)

Furini's goal establishes the parameters of an ideal representation. The stars are merely the medium for human fancy. Yet as symbols for human imagination, Browning wants to give them some revelatory significance as well. Concrete and symbolic, the constellation also requires an imaginative response. To explain the problem of the "uninstructed"—the philistines for whom all objects have only a literal or conventional meaning—Browning pursues his analogy between art and astronomy. He charges the critic to enlighten those who

Would take all outside beauty—film that's furl'd
About a star—for the star's self, endure
No guidance to the central glory,—nay
(Sadder) might apprehend the film was fog,
Or (worst) wish all but vapour well away.
(lines 194-98)

Browning's parable disarms moralist objection. Appearances, understood as starlight or physical beauty, are not sufficient in themselves and must be taken as signifiers. Above and behind appearances is an invisible source of beauty and wonder. Starlight, therefore, signifies more than insubstantial fog (or the gaseous "vapor" of scientific description) because meaning is

not reducible to sense experience. Like so many of Browning's parabolic images, the halo and the orb project the dialectical nature of worldly knowledge and divine love, the body and the soul of human life. The naive viewer of art is here reminded not only of art's power to express more than a literal transcription or utilitarian experience of the flesh but also of the critic's duty to provide more than a dogmatic interpretation of art. In both cases, social conventions can veil essentials and keep the viewer from recognizing the higher aim of any representation of the human form, to project each body symbolically as "The type untampered with, the naked star!" (line 247).

For Browning's male priest-artist, innocent as Adam, the most ideal of forms cannot be known, only revealed. Thus God's best is the naked female form, inherently a figure of men's imaginations. Browning argues for the form of "woman" as a sign, constructed by God and man, to signify a mysterious Other that is both related to and distinct from men's experience, like the stars named by astronomers. In his art, Furini thus imitating God's touch, rather than aping nature's chance, "striving to match the finger-mark of Him" (line 111). By art's power the female form transcends the circumstances and conditions of women: her nakedness ~onfirms the female body's status as a symbol of mankind's higher moral and spiritual nature. Browning's aesthetic thus conflates "human" and divine creativity and imbues concrete form with symbolic content by referring every representation of the female figure to the archetypal pattern of Andromeda.

Not all paintings of the nude would readily accommodate themselves to this argument, and some viewers might object that certain depictions of the female body defied such inspired interpretation. But Browning's choice for pictorial representation, Andromeda, is explicitly a figure of sexual innocence. A virgin sacrificing herself for the good of the community, her situation transcends the personal. The viewer cannot interpret her as an ordinary woman. On the other hand, Browning does not interpret her as a heroic figure either. Perhaps heroic nakedness in a woman would imply wantonness. Instead Browning ensures the innocence and purity of his female figure by interpreting nakedness as vulnerability or deference to forces larger than herself. The artist claims divine in-

spiration in his act of creativity, and the viewer is enjoined to “Have grace to see Thy purpose” and strength to resist any false or base “admixture of their own” (lines 244-45). To preserve the innocence of the gaze, then, Browning’s idealization of the female figure strips both women and men of their sexuality and historical

circumstances. Separating art from life in this way makes artistic representation a “cold pastoral,” indeed, as Keats knew. For Browning, however, it was a necessary argument in order to secure social authority for art in a Darwinian world already frozen by fact and divested of spirit.

PEACOCKS AND SEA-BEASTS:
THE ROLE OF WOMAN IN THE EVOLUTION OF MAN

It is, indeed, fortunate that the law of the equal transmission of characters to both sexes has commonly prevailed throughout the whole class of mammals; otherwise it is probable that man would have become superior in mental endowment to woman, as the peacock is in ornamental plumage to the peahen.

—Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871)¹⁰

Type needs antitype:
As night needs day, as shine needs shade, so good
Needs evil: how were pity understood
Unless by pain? ...

.....

Who proffers help of hand
To weak Andromeda exposed on strand
At mercy of the monster?

—Browning, “With Francis Furini” (lines 483-91)

In an 1881 letter to Frederick Furnivall, Robert Browning claimed that there was no discrepancy between his conception of progressive evolution and that of the Darwinists.¹¹ Like many of his contemporaries raised in Calvinist and Evangelical communities, Browning was able to reconcile natural selection and natural theology by admitting the limitations of human understanding and by attributing the less

beneficent aspects of the struggle for survival to the consequences of the Fall.” Allusions to evolutionary theory appear in several of Browning’s poems, but the most explicit reference to the idea of “survival of the fittest” appears in *Fifine at the Fair* (1872). Passing through a crowd, Browning’s speaker muses on how each individual is provided with special weapons for survival:

brute-beast touch was turned
 Into mankind's safeguard! Force, guile, were arms
 which earned
 My praise, not blame at all: for we must learn to live
 Case-hardened at all points, not bare and sensitive,
 But plated for defence, nay, furnished for attack,
 With spikes at the due place, that neither front nor
 back
 May suffer in that squeeze with nature, we find-life.
 (lines 1775-81)

Like Darwin, Browning sees life in terms of struggle, even combat, through which the self becomes strong, toughened, and no longer vulnerable. Of course, the speaker of this poem is a man of dubious morals, so we may not take his opinion at face value. Nevertheless, this passage shows Browning's familiarity with one of the most important themes derived from Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Since Darwin himself claimed that "as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection,"¹³ Browning justifiably saw his own poetical interpretation of physical and psychological obstacles in the "soul's progress" within the general scope of Darwinism.

Browning published *Fifine at the Fair* within months of Darwin's publication of *The Descent of Man*. Renewing the arguments of *Origin of Species* for evolution based on struggle for survival, Darwin extended his thesis to human evolution, including an account of the evolution of social instincts and morals, racial diversity, and sexual difference. His main concern in Part 1 is to prove that "the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind" (1. 105). Social instincts prevalent among animals form the basis of human sympathy and morality, while evolving mental capacities allow humankind to reflect on past actions, to respond to the praise and blame of their community, and to develop a conscience that acts as an internal guide to action. In Part 2, physical and behavioral differences between the sexes are explained through sexual selection, "the advantage which certain individuals have over others of the same sex and species, in exclusive relation to reproduction" (2.256). Success in the sexual realm, as in the general conditions of life, requires

struggle and competition. But the consequences of sexual selection do not, as they seemed in Darwin's earlier work, tend "to progress towards perfection" of the organism or the species. Among animals, Darwin notes, rivalry of the males to drive off competitors and to charm or excite the females requires greater variability, special weapons, and greater activity by the males than the females of most species. According to Stephen Jay Gould, "The proof that our world is Darwinian lies in the large set of adaptations arising only because they enhance reproductive success but otherwise both hinder organisms and harm species."¹⁴ Sexual selection does not explain the diversity in nature by a lawful unfolding of a divine plan. Clearly some variations, like a bird's bright colors or the encumbering antlers of the elk, are not adaptations to the environment or weapons for survival, but simply ornamentation to secure the attention of the female of the species. By his complicating shift in the terms of evolutionary change from the species' struggle for survival to the individual's struggle for reproductive success, Darwin undermines any teleological fit between the organism and its environment. In effect, Darwin provides an explanation for the unpredictability of (hence, not divinely guided) history of human evolution.

By 1881 Browning knew enough of Darwin's extended thesis to object to its naturalistic explanation of human mental and moral capacities and to the arbitrariness of sexual selection, which Browning interpreted as changes due to "desire and will in the creature":

Tortoises never saw their own shells, top or
 bottom, nor those of their females, and are
 diversely variegated all over, each species af-
 ter their own pattern. And the insects; this
 one is coloured to escape notice, this other to
 attract it, a third to frighten the foe—all out of
 one brood of caterpillars hatched in one day?
 No—I am incredulous. (Letters, 199)

Though he misreads effects for causes, and seems to be responding more to the ideas of Lamarck than of Darwin, Browning was not alone in his criticism of *The Descent of Man*. Charles Lyell, one of Darwin's early mentors, had avoided the implications of unbroken continuity in the evolution of humankind by in-

sisting on the differences between the capacities of animals and humans. Alfred Wallace, who had codiscovered the theory of natural selection, was also astounded by the range of phenomena that Darwin explained by sexual selection, and he too remained unconvinced. Like Browning, these scientists balked at the ethical consequences of Darwin's theory, for not only does Darwin provide a naturalistic account of morality but he sees that "the aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy" and has the "bad effects of the weak surviving and propagating their kind" (1.168). Of course, Darwin makes virtue triumphant by stressing the noble character of civilized communities over so-called savage or primeval tribes. But the need for rivalry and struggle within species as well as between them-to limit the weak from reproducing and keep the progressive possibilities of variation and selection going-permitted the social Darwinists to imagine human culture as, in Huxley's contemptuous phrase, a "pigeon-fancier's polity." In fact, analogies between artificial selection by breeders and the processes of sexual selection inform Darwin's views throughout:

Man scans with scrupulous care the character and pedigree of his horses, cattle, and dogs before he matches them; but when he comes to his own marriage he rarely, or never, takes any such care.... Man, like every other animal, has no doubt advanced to his present high condition through struggle for existence consequent on his rapid multiplication; and if he is to advance still higher he must remain subject to a severe struggle.... There should be open competition for all men; and the most able should not be prevented by laws or customs from succeeding best and rearing the largest number of offspring. (2.402-03)

Despite the scientific importance of Darwin's theory of natural selection and sexual selection, the language and argument of *The Descent of Man* partly undermined Darwin's cultural authority. Anecdotes about the courtships of birds and his analogies between animal and human sexual choices and preferences developed a narrative style that one reviewer aptly called

"the charm of a new romance" (The Times, 7 April 1872). Devoting its implications and charming in its descriptive power, Darwin's treatise plotted the biological mechanisms for humankind's emotional-and even aesthetic-capacities. In "With Francis Furini," Browning questions the authority of scientific knowledge and offers an alternative interpretation of "man's" place in nature.

Furini's address to the "Evolutionists" contrasts the artist's knowledge of the body's passions and pain with the scientist's knowledge, which gives preeminence to "mere blind force" (line 310). What is at issue in Browning's promotion of art against science is the scientist's claim of objectivity. Scientific reasoning, as Thomas Huxley had defined it, relies on observation and experiment and refuses belief in what is unknowable or undemonstrable. Browning assumes the same stance when he asks Furini to preach to his nineteenth-century contemporaries, "the cultured, therefore sceptical" (line 252). The painter's experience may be ranked with the scientist's because Art like Science

Encourages the meanest who has racked
Nature until he gains from her some fact,
To state what truth is from his point of view,
Mere pin-point though it be: since many such
Conduce to make a whole....
(lines 256-61)

The inductive method, one of the foundations of scientific reasoning, is here invoked with an ironic twist. Scientists have believed that the progress of their discipline depends on an accumulative process of observation and experiment to build theories that will eventually be understood as laws of nature. Almost a century before Kuhn's skepticism about the assumptions of objectivity behind this model, Browning's caveat that facts lead only to "what truth is from his point of view" opens up the possibility that both science and art are constrained by the subjectivity of the knower. Here, unlike Browning's earlier defense of the artist against his critics and "uninstructed" public, the painter-priest makes no claim to divine or social authority. Yet because the object of his investigation is on a par with the astronomer, Furini's "little Iffe-experience" can claim as much validity as any modern's, including any scientist's. Thus while Furini's speech to the evolution-

ists takes an agnostic stance with regard to scientific method (“truth I glimpse from depths, you glance from heights,” line 266), it also denies science’s exclusive authority to explain and define human nature.

Browning’s criticism of the evolutionists not only ridicules the materialist bias implied in scientific speculation about “the spasm / Which sets all going” (lines 271-72), but he also points out the contradiction within scientific, thought that gives humankind evolutionary preeminence while defining the evolutionary process itself as

Mere blind force
Mere knowledge undirected in its course
By any care for what is made or marred
In either’s operation
(lines 310-13)

If the descent of man implies progressive development, why not admit God as the vera causa behind evolution? Browning was not alone in his reasserting. Among the many intellectuals who embraced Darwin’s theories, William Benjamin Carpenter, a distinguished writer on science and philosophy, took issue with those who confused the descriptive power of Darwin’s theory with the force behind natural selection.” Carpenter’s solution was to see in Nature “the embodiment of the Divine volition, the ‘force of nature’ as so many diversified modes of its manifestation, and the ‘laws of nature’ as nothing but man’s expressions of the uniformities which his limited observation can discern in its phenomena.”¹⁷ Like Browning, Carpenter saw the process by which we make sense of Nature to be circumscribed by our own mental categories. Evolutionists worked backward (or downward in Browning’s view) looking for the origins of human attributes in the natural world. Browning, Carpenter, and others wanted to see humankind as an active and constructive species, enlightened by self-knowledge and restrained only by their individual mental and moral capacities.

When Browning’s *Furini* turns to his own perspective “at bottom,” metaphysical debate about the “Cause” ends so that he can consider the kind of knowledge that begins with self-consciousness:

soul’s first act
(Call consciousness the soul—some name we need)
Getting itself aware, through stuff decreed
Thereto (so call the body)—who has stept
So far, there let him stand ...
(lines 369-73)

The substitution of “consciousness” for “soul” in these lines, like the earlier substitution of “Cause” for “God” (lines 354-55), purposively confuses the issue between materialists and idealists. Scientific names, he implies, may change our attitude toward the unknown without increasing our knowledge. Instead, Browning’s character offers a psychological argument for art’s special authority in understanding human nature: we know best what we ourselves have experienced.

Do I make pretence
To teach, myself unskilled in learning?
Lo, My life’s work! Let my pictures prove I know
Somewhat of what this fleshly frame of ours
Or is or should be, how the soul empowers
The body to reveal its every mood
Of love and hate, pour forth its plentitude
Of passion.
(lines 375-82)

The artist claims equal authority with the scientist for knowledge of “this fleshly frame.” But the switch from what “is” to what “should be” admits the different purposes of the artist. If both professions seek to “pluck / Veil after veil from Nature” (lines 395-96), the artist recognizes the value of the search itself, for artistic endeavor has its objective correlative in the ethical process art mediates. Art motivates the artist not only to seek knowledge of human nature but to understand the social and moral context, “earth, where wage / War, just for soul’s instruction, pain with joy” (lines 463-64). By beginning with what is closest and working outward (upward as well, in Browning’s optimistic view), the body offers a phenomenological starting point for registering the world’s effect on “my soul’s progress,” conceived by Browning as an ethical as well as cognitive process.

In effect, Browning begins where Darwin left off. Nature is the school for intelligence for both writers. Nature’s training proceeds for Darwin toward repro-

duction, but for Browning it proceeds toward enlarged sympathy. As examples of scientific and artistic discourse, their views point out formal contradictions between the desire for narrative coherence in the structure of the story of natural history and the desire for a happy ending. Either way, such desires are satisfied primarily by the role of woman in both men's stories of human evolution.

For Darwin, the rivalry of the males to drive off competitors and to charm or excite the otherwise passive females resulted in differences both physical and mental between males and females:

Courage, pugnacity, perseverance, strength and size of body, weapons of all kinds, musical organs, both vocal and instrumental, bright colors, stripes and marks, and ornamental appendages, have all been indirectly gained by one sex or the other, through the influence of love and jealousy, through the appreciation of the beautiful in sound, color or form, and through the exertion of a choice. (2.402)

Although most characteristics are passed on equally to all offspring, Darwin thought the special variations that contribute to success in reproduction and appear only at maturity would be inherited primarily by one sex or the other. Since masculine intelligence would become strengthened in adulthood by fighting male rivals, hunting, and defending against enemies, the higher mental faculties of the males would be transmitted "more fully to the male than to the female offspring." As a result of such processes over time, "man has ultimately become superior to woman" (2.328).

One important discrepancy that Darwin describes between the processes of sexual selection among animals and those operating among humans is the capacity of females in nonhuman species to appreciate the songs and beautiful appearance of their male counterparts and to exercise choice in the selection of a mate. Working backward from his perceptions of Victorian society and the evidence he gathered from travelers' reports and anthropologists on the behavior of so-called primitive peoples, Darwin speculates on how human females became the objects rather than the subjects of discrimination and selection: "Man is more powerful in body and mind than woman, and in the savage state he keeps her in a far more abject state of bondage than does the male of any other animal; therefore it is not surprising that he should have gained the

power of selection" (2.372). Of course, if there were no need for men to battle in order to have access to women, then sexual differences should diminish on both sides. But because sexual difference appears to Darwin as a fundamental fact of nature, the structural foundation of his argument for sexual selection, he is willing to jeopardize the narrative continuity between animals and humankind by institutionalizing the nonanimal-like bondage of women. In civilized states, Darwin explained, "although men do not now fight for the sake of obtaining wives, and this form of selection has passed away, yet they generally have to undergo, during manhood, a severe struggle in order to maintain themselves and their families; and this will tend to keep up or even increase their mental powers, and, as a consequence, the present inequality between the sexes" (2.329).

Evelleen Richards and Cynthia Russett have analyzed how Darwin's conclusions were constrained both by his commitment to naturalistic explanations of the human mind and culture and by the sexist social context in which he formulated his theories. According to Richards, "Darwin was not so much promoting patriarchy as defending sexual selection which he could only envisage as operative in some system of male dominance where males held the power of selection and females were valued for their charms." By anthropomorphizing animal behavior and then reapplying such descriptions to human behavior and social relationships, Darwin's analogies "inevitably provided naturalistic corroboration of Victorian values."¹⁸ Russett attributes Darwin's confusion of biological and cultural processes to his breeder model of human evolution. Although he noticed evidence of female intelligence and activity in the processes of natural and sexual selection in animals, Darwin assumed that human females were spared those choices and conditions of life. Slavery and then "civilized" domesticity had removed the need for mental and physical exertion. The division of labor in bourgeois society between male producers and female reproducers was evidence of humankind's escape from the exigencies of individual struggle and combat for reproduction, a measure of an advanced culture. Female uselessness, except as mothers, proved both women's inferiority to men and the social, moral, and, by implication, the aesthetic superiority of the species compared to the rest of

nature.

In Browning's poem, the myth of Andromeda suggests another motive in human evolution for social and moral development. If Furini could paint convincingly Andromeda's situation as "veritable flesh and blood in awe / Of just as true a sea-beast" then viewers would "cry out, curse and swear," "call the gods to help, or catch up stick and stone"; in other words "prove men weak or strong, / Choosers of evil or of good" (lines 496-507). The naked female form, innocent and vulnerable, is given the power to incite men to sympathy and action. But such an imaginative incentive to moral and social goodness-made even more disinterested by the fact that Andromeda exists only in art-requires the same division of labor between active, choosing males and passive, chosen females as in Darwin's theory.

Motivated by pity instead of passion, the struggle for possession of the female is reconceived in Browning's poem as a rescue mission. The only real difference between Darwin's and Browning's conceptions of human evolution is that Browning has seen a moral reason, evidence of a divine plan, behind the struggle for

survival and sexual difference. By representing individual success metaphorically in man's fight against the sea-beast, he characterizes the conditions of life as a struggle against nature that tests men's courage and dominance within the social setting. Browning's conception of the "soul's progress" then conflates the struggle for survival, or adaptation to the environment, with the development of social and moral instincts by placing the female in the center of the battlefield. Reading the Andromeda myth as an alternative story for "human" evolution, this time with a view toward its ethical significance, we find the same ingredients as in Darwin's naturalistic view: good and evil are the outcomes of the struggle with the general conditions of life, but individual success is ensured by the sexual innocence (for Darwin, coyness), vulnerability (passivity, availability), and beauty (relative to male tastes) of the female. Why such a division of labor and attributes should imply the superior intelligence or cultural authority of man is never asked. The historical record of men's achievements and the emotional satisfaction of the Andromeda myth are self-evident.

"THE VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF FLESH"

Paradoxically, the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction.... For gender, like the real, is not only the effect of representation but also its excess, what remains outside discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contained, any representation.

—Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (1987)

In the controversy over nude studies, the promulgators of the new morality challenged the traditional privileges of the art establishment. The protest of the British Matron, authorized by social and political organizations of the middle classes, pressed for an end to the double standard of public and private morality—which often included a double standard for men and women. Browning's rebuttal in "With Francis Furini"

insists on a different kind of double standard. Art's intentions and purposes transcend the conventions of society (see esp. lines 221-31) by claiming moral significance for its subjective and idealized representations of the material world. As a symbol of "Heaven's most consummate of achievements" (132), the nude becomes available, like a star, to mediate men's experience and their imaginative ideals. In moving from

biography to philosophical discourse, from the Andromeda of myth to a pattern discerned only by the astronomer, Browning's defense of art empties the female body of all content except that which confirms God's/man's creativity. The double standard separating art from life, like that which distinguished between public and private morality, reinforced a division of labor and interest between men and women—a sexual difference also implied by conceiving of art in terms of male artists and female models. Though Browning valiantly defends art's potential to do more than merely imitate or reproduce social conventions, his argument for nude studies reinforces conventional attitudes toward women.

Like the British Matron, other women in Victorian society believed that changing social circumstances would end the unequal treatment of men and women. Some feminists hoped that scientific approaches to education and social organization would allow them equal access to knowledge and power. Instead, Darwin and his followers simply provided a scientific explanation for male dominance. According to Richards, “the only recourse for feminism . . . was to assert that woman was ‘different but equal’: to claim for woman a biologically based ‘complementary genius’ to man’s—a ‘genius’ which was rooted in her innate maternal and womanly qualities.”¹⁹ Interestingly, the scientific materialism that distressed religious thinkers when applied to the mind-body problem, or to evidence for the existence of souls, was readily accepted to explain women's inferior mental and physical capabilities.

In Browning's poem, the image of a vulnerable female evokes “pity” and competition for moral action. Because of her purity and innocence the artist's nude proves man's and woman's superiority to mere sexual desire. Only a savage (i.e., anyone not a Victorian gentleman) would find cause for lust or evidence of depravity in the plight of Andromeda. If the female is thus essentialized in her naked (natural) state as dependent and inferior to her male counterpart, the British Matron could rejoice (if she would only be educated) in the triumph of an advanced culture that celebrates her form in art as a sexless, moral cipher of life outside and beyond the exigencies of nature.

Art and science, then, may be seen to conspire in representing woman as less evolved than man while powerful as a symbol of man's superiority to the rest

of nature. Closer to the apes in the evolutionary plan, women are angels in a man's world, encouraging his spiritual growth to the extent that they remain figments of his imagination and silent partners to his social order.

Such a paradoxical view of nature and culture did not go unchallenged or unmodified. By limiting the factors involved in sexual selection to competition among males for possession of females, Darwin narrowed his own best insights into natural history. He had understood that natural selection was nonteleological, and he argued against those who saw divine intentions behind the adaptations of organisms to the environment. But if the natural world was not designed by an all-powerful being, then neither were the sexes ready-made to their roles in social evolution. Darwin's theory of sexual selection justified the social inequality of men and women on biological grounds, but many social Darwinists believed that greater female emancipation from economic and social restraints would promote eugenic, that is, biological, improvement of the race.²⁰

Similarly, Victorian artists had a hard time keeping Andromeda chained. Adrienne Munich's recent study of Victorian representations of the Perseus-Andromeda myth explores the ambiguity of gender roles within their archetypal presentation of sexual difference. After all, who is truly heroic, the well-armed man or the self-sacrificing woman? Munich cites works by Victorians who see the female nude as more interesting, more powerful in her courage and purity than her would-be savior. In “With Francis Furini” (lines 508-12), Browning's imagery suggests his own envious identification with the transcendent nature of Andromeda and his inability to defeat the beast-theories of evolution by anything more than an Andromeda-like faith and perseverance.²¹

If Victorian science and art had difficulty managing such unwieldy conceptions of sexual difference in evolutionary narratives and in nude studies, what about Browning's poetics? Does the poet's pen exceed the representative powers of the painter's brush and the scientist's facts? Or does gender disrupt representation in poetry as surely as in art or science?

At the end of his poem, Browning exhorts Furini to take Joan of Arc as a subject, to paint her at the moment when she is first inspired to defend the king

of France. In exchanging a mythological figure for a historical one, albeit another virgin and martyr, Browning risks a return to the kind of realism in art that had made nude studies morally problematic. He also risks reducing the interest of his poem to the mere facts of autobiography, for his choice of subject is that of his son's painting, and Browning repeats lines he had written to accompany it. However, the poet's dramatic interpretation of Joan of Arc is more telling than the painting executed by Pen Browning. While ostensibly renewing his argument for nude studies, Browning's oblique references to Joan's character undermine the idea of woman as a transcendent type, or as vulnerable to men's moral choices.

Less ethereal than Andromeda, Joan's youth and peasant status should provide material for fresh interpretation of the female body. Instead, her naked beauty evokes the same sympathetic response, in Browning's view, that lets thought about her place in history or any belief in the miracle of her later actions be "bettered by fiction," namely, her legendary innocence. Joan's body becomes another example of art's power to "arrest decay" and "cause the world to bless / For ever each transcendent nakedness / Of man and woman" (lines 386-89). Again unselfconscious beauty alone (appropriately set in and framed by natural surroundings) justifies the psychological and moral authority of artist. Browning dramatizes and comments on Joan's encounter with the blue bird only to emphasize the subjectivity of her decision and of our interpretations of her experience. According to Browning, her inspiration and moral authority come not from God or mere knowledge of the facts, but from an imaginative analogy she draws from nature. Her rustic oath "By my troth" would be more properly "By my Martin" because the truth of her experience is based on a pathetic fallacy, her identification of the plight of a martin-fisher with that of the dauphin. But the imaginative leap that leads Joan on her path to saintliness leads the reader of Browning's poem to wonder about her heroism. What is the missing link between Pen Browning's painting of Joan's objectified innocence and the poet's interest in "saintliness that's simply innocent / Of guessing sinnership exists to cure / All in good time" (lines 563-65)?

Pen Browning's work is vague and uninteresting. We see, in a wooded landscape, the back of an awk-

wardly posed nude figure, standing before a pond. Beyond the title, there is nothing in the painting to suggest that this is Joan of Arc. But then no painting could capture Browning's figure because many of its most important details are presented as negatives:

Burn with-Joan of Arc!

Not at the end, nor midway when there grew
The brave delusions, when rare fancies flew
Before the eyes, and in the ears of her
Strange voices woke imperiously astir.
(lines 568-72)

Nor could a painting capture the unspoken words of her "heart's admonishing"—"Can there be / Country and king's salvation—all through me?"—especially if her face is turned away, as Browning's instructions to the painter suggest. Browning's verbal description reveals much more than a "peasant girl all peasant-like—" This negated glimpse of Joan in full armor reminds us that Browning's own dramatic art, which is often "bettered" by its use of history, evokes the irreducible variety of human behavior more than his defense of Furini's nudes or his attack on the evolutionists has admitted.

Though Browning's defense of his son's painting limits him to justifying her physical and moral purity, what a good candidate Joan of Arc might have been for one of Browning's introspective dramatic monologues. It was impossible in the nineteenth century to mention the Maid of Orleans without raising a number of controversial questions about her status as a saint or heretic, a peasant girl or brave soldier, an innocent or a wanton. Moreover, there is probably no more sexually ambiguous figure in history or literature than the girl-boy Joan of Arc, maddened or inspired by patriotism or faith in God, who defended either despots or the national unity. In the fifteenth century, she was burned at the stake as a heretic and miscreant; but at the end of the nineteenth century, she was reclaimed by France as a national heroine; and in the early twentieth century, she was canonized by feminists and the Roman Catholic church. Instead of pursuing the moral and social dilemmas raised by her gender and historical circumstances, Browning negates as much as he affirms, reducing historical complexities, to fit his idea of the nude's archetypal simplicity.

From Pippa to Pompilia, female figures in Browning's poetry had often shamed with their pure motives the more convoluted rationalizations of men. Here allusion to the powerful historical figure of Joan of Arc contradicts the image of the vulnerable female body wrought by Browning's moral imagination and under-

mines the masculine bias of his poetics.²² If we take into account what is ignored, negated, or not said about real women, Browning's poem exemplifies not only the conflicted context of art and science but also the essentializing logic of Victorian constructions of women.

Hamilton College

NOTES

Clinton, New York

I would like to thank Professors Daniel Bivona, David DeLaura, and the members of the University of Pennsylvania's PARRS Seminar for their generous and helpful responses to

an earlier version of this essay.

1. Quoted by Geoffrey Grigson in *The Female Form in Painting* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 21.
2. All quotations from Browning's poetry are taken from *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth and New Haven: Penguin Books and Yale University Press, 1981).
3. The term "subverted support" comes from Teresa de Lauretis, whose analysis of feminist filmmaking negotiates the representation of "women to woman as well as the female subject's relation to narrative (cinema)." - The oxymoron captures the idea that a feminist approach does not merely reverse the terms of patriarchy, but has to develop new strategies of coherence between art and "the Real" (see *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], 114).
4. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (New York: Longman, 1981), 87. I have drawn on the work of several social historians in this section of my essay. Jeffrey Weeks offers the most pointed critique of sexual politics in modern England. For a full account of the repeal campaign and the LNA, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and on social purity movements in general, see Edward J. Bristow's *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977); hereafter cited in the text.
5. Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1988), 85.
6. Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 167. Although the focus of Nead's study is the representation of so-called respectable femininity and the fallen woman, her analysis of the ideological context for nineteenth-century painting is useful for understanding the audience for nude studies as well; hereafter cited in the text.
7. Several art historians offer insightful accounts of attitudes toward class and sex in Realist painting and of the particular problem of the nude in nineteenth-century French painting. See Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin Books, 1971); Thomas J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), chap. 2; and Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), esp. 44-45, 51-56.
8. Lynda Nead analyses Millais's painting and its reception by Victorian art critics in "Representation, Sexuality, and the Female Nude," *Art History* 6 June 1983: 230-34.
9. William C. DeVane gives the biographical details behind Browning's poem in *Browning's Parleyings: The Autobiography of a Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), 167-81. DeVane claims that Horsley himself conducted the controversy over nude studies by writing the letter signed by the "British Matron" in addition to his own signed letter to *The Times*. I have found no evidence for this claim. Browning's satirical remark, calling the art critic "a satyr masked as ma-

- tron," simply conflates both sides of the issue for Browning.
10. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 11:329. This edition is a photoreproduction of the 1871 edition published by J. Murray, London; hereafter cited in the text.
 11. *Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. Thurman L. Hood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 199.
 12. James R. Moore summarizes the different ways in which Christians reconciled their beliefs with evolutionary theory in *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
 13. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (New York: NAL Penguin, 1958), 450.
 14. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1985), 45.
 15. Peter Bowler has written several books on the theoretical differences between Darwin and other Victorian scientists and the subsequent misreading of Darwin's theories by Victorian intellectuals (see especially, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). Cynthia Eagle Russett discusses the context of Darwin's work and disagreements over the social implications of Darwin's theory of sexual selection in *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
 16. See Rodger Smith's "The Human Significance of Biology: Carpenter, Darwin and the Vera Causa," in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 216-31.
 17. Quoted in Smith, 228.
 18. Evelleen Richards, "Darwin and the Descent of Woman," in *The Wider Domain of Evolutionary Thought*, ed. David Oldroyd and Ian Langham (Boston: Reidel, 1988), 76-77. See also Russett, *Sexual Science*, chap. 3.
 19. Richards, %.
 20. See Greta Jones's *Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction between Biological and Social Theory* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980), 111-12. -
 21. Adrienne A. Munich, *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
 22. While acknowledging Browning's investment in sexual difference, Rowena Fowler concludes her survey of "Browning's Nudes" by emphasizing his sympathy with the predicament of female vulnerability: "Through identifying with female nakedness he extends, but ultimately recognizes the bounds of the male perspective" (*Victorian Poetry* 27 [1989]: 29-46).